

*Who Is the “Original Affluent Society”?
Ipili “Predatory Expansion” and the
Porgera Gold Mine, Papua New Guinea*

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In the 1970s, first-world fantasies of “ecologically noble savages” were key to the creation of alliances between indigenous groups, environmentalists, and affluent first-world publics (Conklin and Graham 1995). More recently, however, anthropologists have grown increasingly critical of such stereotypes of indigenous people (Buege 1996). In areas as diverse as Amazonia, Australia, North America, and Indonesia, indigenous peoples find their political leverage derives from filling first-world fantasies that are often essentialized and stifling (Brown 2003; Carneiro da Cunha and Almeida 2000; Li 2000; Povinelli 1999).

This dynamic has taken another interesting twist in Papua New Guinea. Unlike many Commonwealth countries, Papua New Guinea has no settler population, and, unlike many African states, it has no majority ethnic group. Furthermore, Australia’s administration of Papua New Guinea was both well meaning and under-resourced. As a result there has been little alienation of land and it is difficult recognize Papua New Guineans as “indigenous people” separate from “settler” populations, as is typically done in Australia, Africa, and the New World. At the same time, however, Papua New Guinea is highly reliant on resource rents, and the activities of international logging, mining, and hydrocarbon companies present a picture of David-and-Goliath struggle between local people and transnational capital that is comfortably familiar to many first-world activists.

Like scholars elsewhere, Melanesianists are increasingly dissatisfied with stereotypes of grassroots Papua New Guineans as ecologically noble savages. A growing literature has, for instance, emphasized the ways in which compensation claims for damage to the environment are part of a complex local politics. Glenn Banks has argued that compensation claims

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are often a way of expressing a sense of disenfranchisement by people outside of mining lease areas (2002), while Martha Macintyre and Simon Foale have argued convincingly that even for people *within* mining lease areas, claims of environmental damage are often expressions of dissatisfaction with social concerns couched in environmental idioms (2002).

But there is a danger that these responsible works could be misread by policy elites in Port Moresby, the national capitol, who often see land-owners as savages more nasty than noble. Papua New Guineans have one of the best track records in the world for extracting concessions from foreign developers and the national government, and the demands of land-owners have become so strident that the overall perception nationwide is that they are corrupted opportunists who have given up their traditional culture in order to “go for money” (Filer and others 2000). Thus, at one industry conference in 2000, the president of the Papua New Guinea Chamber of Mining and Petroleum claimed that “people issues are at the forefront of the mining and petroleum industries” in Papua New Guinea. The industry’s biggest challenge, he claimed, were “community problems that could have been avoided” and that were caused by “so-called ‘land-owners’” who ripped off the government. “The rip-off is so blatant,” he said, “[that] it penetrates into the fabric of the government” (Golub fieldnotes 2000). Other speakers were more blunt. “Community affairs issues will shut down this country,” said one mining executive, himself from the highlands region (Golub fieldnotes 2000).

Issues of compensation, development, and positive and negative values associated with “savagery” thus take on a unique figuration in contemporary Papua New Guinea. In this article I examine some of these issues by describing the Ipili response to mining at the Porgera gold mine in the highlands province of Enga. The proactive Ipili response to mining is not, I argue, a result of their “corruption” from a “pure” state prior to European contact, but an elaboration of deep-seated themes in their culture that are perfectly intelligible given their unique historical circumstances. Making sense of Ipili “corruption” thus provides one way to rethink the various stereotypes of savages—both nasty and noble—that are in play today. In closing I suggest that if anthropologists have, as outside “experts,” the ability to grasp something about Ipili culture that might elude the Ipili themselves, it is also possible that the Ipili have come to understand the cultures of the first-worlders they encounter better than we are willing to admit. For just as Western anxieties about the environment shape how “we” imagine them as savages both noble and ignoble,

so too do Ipili aspirations for “development” lead them to ponder the value and morality of the white world, which so eagerly seeks the gold in their valley.

THE MINE AND THE IPILI

The Ipili are an ethnic group of roughly 6,000 people living in the Porgera district in the far west of Enga Province in the highlands of Papua New Guinea (book-length monographs about them include Banks 1997; Biersack 1980; Filer 1999; Golub 2001; Jacka 2003; and Jackson and Banks 2001). Ipili live in two valleys—the Porgera and Paiela. Since contact with the Australian administration in the late 1930s, Porgera’s massive ore body has made it central to Ipili history as well as Papua New Guinea. Mining and hydrocarbon developments are of primary importance in contemporary Papua New Guinea, which has relied on taxes and royalties from extractive industries to prop up its sagging budget. In 2004, for instance, 5.9 billion kina worth of minerals (including oil) was exported, constituting 73 percent of all exports (Bank of PNG 2004; for an overview of the industry, see Banks 2001). (Throughout this period the kina was worth roughly one US dollar.)

Operated by its majority shareholder, the Vancouver-based, transnational Placer Dome Inc, Porgera rose to global prominence in 1992—its second year of production—when it produced 1,485,077 ounces of gold, making it the third most productive gold mine in the world. Porgera mine continues to be a national priority today even as it matures (Jackson and Banks 2002). In 2004 the mine produced roughly 740,000 ounces of gold and accounted for roughly 15 to 20 percent of the country’s gross domestic product, and forecasts for 2005 expect output to approach 790,000 ounces (Placer Dome Inc 2004).

For many reasons—mostly having to do with the government’s good intentions and weak army—the Ipili have been some of the most active and successful indigenous people in the world to have pressed claims against the state and global capital. Between 1987 and 1996, compensation payments from the company alone amounted to 30,927,886 kina (Filer and others 2000, 95). In addition, the Ipili own equity in the mine, have received another 12,423,930 kina in wages between 1989–1992, receive royalties from gold sales, and have a multitude of new services provided to them by the government, including a hospital, new roads, a trust fund that will pay school fees for the children, and a variety of other

services (Filer 1999, 108). Indeed, the Ipili are not only the lessors of the special mining lease on which Placer operates the Porgera gold mine, they own the high-rise building in Port Moresby where Placer Niugini has its corporate headquarters. So thorough-going are Ipili attempts to extract benefits from the mine that Timothy Andambo has described the tangle of trust funds, equity companies, and committees that manage the Ipili's numerous investments as "social technology to extract rent from the Porgera lode" (2002). While later compensation agreements signed in Papua New Guinea proved more lucrative than the Porgera agreements negotiated by the Ipili in the late 1980s, the Ipili's were the model on which subsequent deals were based, and they remain today a signal example of indigenous people negotiating successfully with both government and industry.

While many landowners are vilified at the national level, few seem to have been as strongly disliked for as long as the Ipili. The word generally used is "truculent." Government patrol officer John Black remarked in an interview that he "found the people on the Porgera to be very truculent and cheeky" when he first ventured into the area in 1938 (Davis 1994). In a 1964 report, one administration official noted that "the Porgera have a long history of truculence" (Porgera, folder 2, 64/65). Mervyn Meggitt recorded his impression of them as "a truculent and difficult people" (1974, 42). Even Father Philip Gibbs, a Catholic priest with many years experience in Porgera, wrote that "the Ipili are not the most co-operative people to work with. At times I was prepared to agree with Meggitt" (1975, 23). Contemporary opinion is much the same. During my first visit to the PNG Department of Mines in Port Moresby, the Porgera mining coordinator introduced me by saying, "Everyone, this is Alex Golub, he's an anthropologist studying the Porgera landowners—he actually *lives* with them!" (Golub fieldnotes 2000). The overall view was summarized with epigrammatic flair by one of the senior officials of the mine who said to me simply, "They're a fucked culture" (Golub fieldnotes 2000).

In addition to "truculence," white outsiders are also often disappointed by how Ipili spend mine-derived income. Much recent thinking among Papua New Guinean elites has been shaped by the rhetoric of the "triple bottom line" of social, ecological, and financial responsibility, which has become increasingly common in global corporate culture over the past seven years. Policy elites envisioning such a triple bottom line hope that compensation payments will be used as "seed capital" to fund businesses that will lead to "sustainable development," and they are inevitably dis-

appointed by Porgerans' less than farsighted approach to the sudden influx of benefits they've received (Elkington 1998). Porgera has become a boomtown with all of the associated disorders. Social impact reports indicate that sexually transmitted diseases and domestic violence have risen since the opening of the mine (Bonnell 1999). Money has been spent on store-bought foods such as tinned fish and rice. Big-budget items such as pickup trucks (utes) are purchased and quickly run into the ground, although the stories of entire vehicles abandoned for brand-new ones simply because of a flat tire are, of course, exaggerations. Finally, it is true that Ipili landowners do engage in the famous drunken spree in Port Moresby hotels that are part of the landowner stereotype.

In sum, although those unfamiliar with Papua New Guinea may be tempted to see Ipili as ecologically noble savages victimized by a government so hungry for royalties that it acts against the interests of its people, the situation is in fact more complex. Indeed, elite views of Ipili are more in line with stereotypes of savages who are pathologically degraded rather than ecologically noble. Ipili landowners have come to symbolize, then, the inverse of civilization and “development” that the metropole hopes will result from resource development. To be sure, pumping millions of dollars into a small rural community is enough to bring out the bad side of just about anybody, and every gold strike has its boomtown, with all of the excesses that entails. However, it is clear that there must be more to Ipili culture than simply savagery. How, then, can we make sense of this stigmatized group?

AN ORIGINAL ORIGINAL AFFLUENT SOCIETY?

Anthropology has long compared “our” way of life with that of “others,” although the moral valence given to each of these terms has been notoriously changeable. Writings about “ecologically noble savages” are part of a long literature that positively values the nobility of those untouched by the corrupting influence of “our” society, a literature that can be traced to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1969), although he himself did not use the phrase. Anthropologists as different as Marshall Sahlins, Margaret Mead, and Marilyn Strathern have all used the comparative scope of anthropology to demonstrate the arbitrary and conventional nature of the West's “native cosmology” to put forward alternate visions of economic activity, sexuality, and individualism suggested by the viewpoints of other cultures (see, eg, Sahlins 2000a). When the moral valence of the other is inverted,

we find the now-familiar tropes of savagery and barbarism, which painted colonial subjects as the inverse of Western utopic fantasies (Trouillot 1991).

However, as Ira Bashkow has noted (1999), anthropologists and Europeans are not the only people to use the experience of cultural difference as an opportunity to moot their own morality. Whites, their ways of life, and their material culture have become a touchstone by which Ipili gauge their past and imagine their future (Bashkow 1999). To understand the “savage” nature of the Ipili response to mining, we must understand the way in which Ipili, like “us,” cut back and forth between positive and negative valuations of “the other.” Just as Western considerations of “savages” tell us as much about the West’s imagination of itself, so too do Ipili imaginings of white ways of life provide a keen insight into their own hopes and fears.

The title of this paper is filched from two separate articles by Marshall Sahlins: “The Original Affluent Society” (2000b) and “The Segmentary Lineage: An Organization of Predatory Expansion” (1961). “The Original Affluent Society” famously argues that hunter-gatherer societies are not starving, desperate primitives but simply people who work much less than “us westerners” and do not mind the lower standards of living that result. The article then spins this out into a critique of Western conceptions of human nature, which take as their premise the idea that people are inherently “infinitely needy.” “The Segmentary Lineage” proposes that the African lineage systems described in British Structural-Functionalism do not tend toward equilibrium but are part of an aggressive, historically specific moment of territorial expansion of the Tiv and Nuer. Since Sahlins’s use of the term “affluent society” took liberties with John Kenneth Galbraith’s earlier book of that title (1958), I figured Sahlins would not mind if I followed suit. My juxtaposition is meant to be more than merely cute—I mean to use “original affluent society: an organization of predatory expansion” to characterize (with only a little bit of violence to the original meaning of the terms) Ipili response to miners.

The Ipili are an “affluent society” in Galbraith’s original sense of a people whose historical consciousness is haunted by a past they imagine as an “unedifying mortification of the flesh—from hunger, sickness, and cold” and who revel in dreams of a future world provided by mining revenues “where the ordinary person has access to amenities—foods, entertainment, personal transportation, and plumbing—in which not even the rich rejoiced a century ago” (Galbraith 1958, 2). Thus while Sahlins inverts

Galbraith's image of 1950s satiety to suggest that hunter-gatherers had their needs satisfied because they were not plagued by infinite want, I flip Sahlins's image back over to suggest that Ipili see themselves in very much the same light that Galbraith suggests.

By “predatory expansion” I mean not territorial expansion but a unique approach to the lifeways and material culture of Australians and, by extension, white people more generally. Ipili have aggressively sought to co-opt and control outsiders in order to gain benefits that will mitigate unpleasant aboriginal circumstances. The unique focus with which Ipili have prosecuted the finding and taking of novel ideas and concepts represents a culturally specific way of incorporating novelty into their lives. Like the Hageners described by Francesca Merlan and Alan Rumsey, Ipili have a “rapacious desire to experience and explore . . . novelty” (1991, 231). This expansive, desirous attempt to capture foreign novelty is in part a result of Ipili situation in the “Papua Borderlands” where there has always been a flow of goods, ideas, and people between centers of population (Biersack 1995). But even more than this, Porgeran “expansiveness” is a natural outgrowth of deep-seated themes in Ipili culture, and it is to these themes that I now turn.

THEMES IN IPILI CULTURE

In order to understand the cultural origin of Ipili responses to mining, it is necessary to begin at a very abstract level—with their cosmology. As Aletta Biersack has pointed out, at the base of Ipili cosmology is a deep-seated concern with entropy and labor, “an Ipili metaphysics of finitude” rooted in the idea that “life is perpetuated only at the cost of life, that regeneration and death are, inexplicable dimensions of the human condition” (1998, 43). Ipili understand their own life energy to be finite, and in expending it through work they deplete themselves in what Biersack calls a “service economy” (1995b, 241). Thus work creates replacement even as it diminishes the worker. In the case of children, both the transmission of bodily fluids in conception and the labor of child rearing strengthen the growing child, even as they literally exhaust the parent.

Ipili express this by saying that their children are their *lawa*. At its base level, *lawa* means to exchange, in the sense of switching places or roles. Ipili gloss the term in Tok Pisin as *sens* (change). For instance, a man once told me of his young son, “Em i sens bilong mi”—literally, “He is my change.” Thus, a man is replaced by the son he nurtured, as the son

becomes the leader of the household, the hardest worker, and so forth. Similarly, the practice of sister exchange is referred to as *imalini lawa lawa* (cross-sex sibling exchange), because the sister of a new affine (relative by marriage) takes the place of your sister when you marry her, just as your sister has married her cross-sex sibling. Thus the Ipili verb *lawa* combines notions of reproduction and transformation, replacement *and* innovation in a way that does not pit one process against the other: a woman comes to take the place of one's sister, but the sister's replacement is an affine and not a consanguine (blood relative).

This zero-sum system of energy transmission and replacement is what Biersack has called "the sacrificial principle": "equivalence is always achieved through reciprocal labor and life, through a mutuality of sacrifice" (Biersack 1998, 55). I have referred to it as a "work-wealth equation" (see Golub 2001, 78–80). Unlike the classical protestant attitude in which work is considered ennobling, Ipili see work as a necessary but tiresome activity from which you can gain no surplus—you get out what you put in. You work, you get old, and you die. Here is Galbraith's life of hardship that I mentioned earlier: for the Ipili, there really is nothing but death and taxes.

Further, Biersack has argued that the Ipili distinguish between *nembo*, which she glosses as "mind," and *umbaini*, which she glosses as "body" or "skin." They employ a theory of action in which promises to act (words) are proved true indicators of a hidden intentionality only when they are redeemed by the performance of the promised action—a movement of the body (flesh). It is for this reason that Biersack (1996), borrowing from the Gospel of John, says that for Ipili, action is "word made flesh" (John 1:14). However, it is important to note that *nembo* has an affective component tied to Ipili notions of desire. Translating *nembo* as "mind" and linking it with John's "word" (in Greek, *logos*), Biersack produces overtones of logic and rationality that I believe fail to capture the full force of the Ipili term. *Nembo* does move people to action, and Ipili people do say it is made manifest "on the skin." But I believe a better translation would be something along the lines of "appetitive desire" or "desirous intelligence." *Nembo* is the intentional part of people, but it is always directed toward an object, and for affective or desirous ends. It is the hunger or desire that prompts to action. Indeed, the fact that it is manifested in the body and in action suggests that it is incarnated and passion-filled in a way that Biersack's Johannine phenomenology fails to convey.

A brief comparison with the notion of *hame* among the Huli, who live adjacent to the Ipili, will help make this point (Frankel 1986, 83–84; 140–143). While Steven Frankel linked the Huli faculty of *mini* as a sense of “social responsiveness” similar to the well-documented example of *noman* from Hagen (A Strathern 1981), Frankel translated *hame* as “desire” or—more tellingly—“covetousness.” “This may be a simple desire for food,” he wrote, “but extends to stronger feelings including cupidity, lust and yearning” (Frankel 1986, 140). The pathology *lingi* results when a person’s *hame* becomes desirous for the food that another eats and enters their stomach, making them ill. The point to note here is that *hame* is an inherent human faculty and not an unusual or pathological form of sorcery. It is for this reason that cases of *lingi* are accepted with “unusual equanimity”—because “*hame* is regarded as an inevitable response to the sight of food, so that the individual is not seen as culpable for any ill effects that follow from it. One woman said ‘how could we take anyone to court when we all have eyes?’” (Frankel 1986, 140).

This concept of covetous desire, I argue, is very similar to the concept of *nembo* or *emborene*—a term used to denote the animate, substantive form of *nembo*. Ipili believe that at night, when people sleep, it is possible for their *emborene* to travel outside their bodies. As in Frankel’s description of *hame*, the intent of one’s *emborene* is typically malicious—it seeks to injure and hurt those of whom one is jealous and envious.

The ubiquity of this concept of *emborene* as roving, appetitive, vindictive power is evinced in the fact that it features in the most popular story where I conducted research: the story of the python Kupiane. In the climactic scene a couple are prevented from returning home by a sudden rainstorm that floods a river in their path. Sleeping outdoors in the rain, they remember their two young children who are sleeping safely and soundly back at home. The *emborene* of the parents leave their bodies, intent to attack and perhaps kill their own children out of jealousy and envy. It is only the intervention of the python Kupiane that saves the children. A story that features parents attacking and hurting their children is disconcerting to outsiders, but the Kupiane myth is one of the most popular and well known in Porgera, and the sound of the cicadas’ increased chirping (a sure sign of evil spirits in Porgera) as the parents’ *emborene* approach the house is vividly performed and enthusiastically received. It illustrates perfectly the idea that humans are driven by a faculty that is at once rationating and spurred on by desire with an affective content: driven, occasionally greedy, and sometimes violent.

Given a zero-sum metaphysics of finitude and a rational faculty that tends toward the appetitive, it is not surprising to find that Ipili culture is, in some sense, about unfulfilled desire. Thus it is not surprising to see that most Ipili religious and ritual activity is focused on ways to short-circuit the work-wealth equation. It is through religious activity that Ipili seek to get something for nothing—to gain an increment of wealth and fertility that comes without effort, rather than through labor. Religion offers, for the Ipili, “an escape from an order to which the sacrificial principle and the metaphysics of finitude from which it stems are integral” (Biersack 1998, 60), and benefits become, for the first time, cost-free.

RESPONSE TO HISTORY

If Ipili conceive of a past full as of want, they strive for a future full of plenty. Throughout their short recorded history, the Ipili have experienced a constant cycle of enthusiasm and disappointment focused on millennial movements, which has shaped their response to mining. These movements express in world-historical terms the same desire that underlies Ipili fertility rites: a short-circuiting of the work-wealth equation in a moment of “world transfiguration,” which would replace of a metaphysics of finitude for a golden age of effortless health and prosperity. The inevitable disappointment they experience does not disillusion them, however—a world of gain with expense. The denouement of these movements always ends up reinforcing an overall millenarian spirit even as it discredits a particular millennial movement.

At the broadest level, Ipili affinity with themes of world transformation is prehistoric. The Ipili share with their neighbors a sense of the decreasing fertility of the earth and in the past believed that only a large-scale, region-wide series of rituals performed at certain sacred sites could renew the earth’s fertility, which would result in a time of darkness, known in Ipili as *yu undupi* (*yu* meaning earth, ground, territory, and *undupi* meaning night or darkness). If the ritual was performed properly, the cosmic clock would be reset and people would experience a period of unprecedented fertility with bumper crops and strong children. If the ritual was not performed, then the world would end (for Huli equivalents, see Glasse 1995). In addition to demonstrating the antiquity of themes of Ipili transfiguration, beliefs in *yu undupi* also serve to demonstrate the unusual tendency for Ipili to encounter world-transfiguring events. Like the movements that would come after it, it is based firmly on actual fact. There is

a good reason why the Ipili have a time of darkness legend—there was a time of darkness. In the mid-seventeenth century, a volcanic island off of the coast of Papua New Guinea erupted. The resulting cloud covered much of the highlands, blotting out the sun for a period of days and leaving a coating of extremely fertile tephra soil (Blong 1982). As a result, crops planted after the eruption were spectacularly successful.

The period from first contact in 1938 to the establishment of an expatriate mining presence in Porgera in 1948 was also a time of world-transforming cults. Ipili, Huli, and Enga peoples formed an active cosmopolitan community through which innovations flowed, including religious and ritual practice (Biersack 1995a). One of the most important of these cults has come to be known in the literature as “The Cult of Ain,” which flourished in Porgera between 1943 and 1945 (Biersack 1996; Gibbs 1977; Jacka 2002; Meggitt 1973, 1974; Wiessner and Tumu 2001). The cult was a response to the influx of porcine and human epidemics that swept through Enga province as the vanguard of white penetration, and this response exhibited a deep-seated cultural logic.

The focus of the cult was the restoration of health and the gaining of wealth through ritual means. Participants were encouraged to sacrifice pigs to the sky. Old taboos and sexual prohibitions were abrogated after ritual bathing rendered people immune to pollution, and people who undertook cult rituals often underwent ecstatic fits of shaking. In general the cult was concerned with issues of fertility and wealth typical of a wide variety of Melanesian societies. In Porgera, however, it took on a millenarian tone. Instead of simply bringing fertility, Porgerans believed that the cult would bring the end of the world and the ascension of Ipili to heaven, assuring them immortality and endless affluence. Ipili enthusiastically embraced the cult with spectacular consequences, including the decimation of Ipili pig herds in massive sacrifices and one large-scale mass suicide. By the late 1940s, however, the world failed to end, Ipili became disenchanted, and the cult temporarily died out.

At roughly the same time a new series of prophecies were being made by Porgerans themselves. Three men named Esape, Pingipe, and Kipu began describing a series of visions that they received from Kupiane, the python protagonist of the story in the previous section. At his behest, they instituted the sacrifice of pigs at sacred pools and performed a variety of miraculous feats using his power. Most importantly, Pingipe prophesied that “birds from all over the world would eat fruit from the trees that grow on Mt. Warokari” and that when that happened “the world would

end.” Another prophecy of his predicted that “men would come with wonderful things in their netbags” (Golub fieldnotes, 2001).

The Cult of Ain and Pingipe’s prophecies would continue to impact Ipili even after European contact. The presence of missionaries, miners, and the colonial government would all come to be understood within the framework of these earlier movements.

The arrival of missionaries caused the Ipili to reevaluate the Cult of Ain. The influx of material objects, the suppression of fighting in the valley, and the arrival of Western forms of health care (particularly medical injections) left a huge impression. Ipili quickly came to believe that the Cult of Ain was completely true and that Ain, like John the Baptist, had prepared them for the coming of Jesus. The similarities between the earlier cult and Christianity were obvious. As Philip Gibbs wrote, “Both call for the rejection of the old which is ‘bad’ and the acceptance of a ‘new way,’ a ‘good road.’ Both have a ritual purification ceremony of washing. Both have extraordinary happenings: shaking, or now speaking in tongues. Both present a new figure as the center of worship: the sun and God. . . . There is a sharing of food which distinguished the faithful. . . . Adherents are to wait for the imminent end of the world. . . . Both have the same basic function of improving general well being” (1977, 24).

Ipili today believe that Jesus died in 1946 or so, and that his sacrifice “opened the roads” and allowed the flow of valuable objects and powerful outsiders into the valley. Good things, symbolized above all by labor-saving steel implements and sickness-curing injections of antibiotics, seemed exactly the sorts of things prophesied by the precontact cult. Indeed, since most Ipili ritual before European contact revolved around acquiring wealth and health through magical means, the coming of these goods was itself proof that the precontact cult, as well as Christianity, was efficacious.

Christianity proved to be overwhelmingly popular in Porgera, and aboriginal rituals and religious practices stopped almost immediately. This should not be interpreted as the triumph of Western culture over that of the Ipili. On the contrary, the alacrity with which the Ipili became Christian was an indication of their own ability to latch onto new ideas and take control of them. The assimilation of Christianity to the Cult of Ain was not the replacement of old culture for new, but the Ipili’s typically expansive attempt to take hold of and incorporate valuable new ideas into their own culture. As a Catholic priest, Gibbs found his early missionary work in Porgera to be deeply implicated in precontact cults. “Now when

I ask whether the cult from Lyeimi [the Cult of Ain] was true I hear, ‘of course it was true. Now we see the skin of the white man. Look at my axe, my bush knife.’ ‘Yes, it was true. It has all come with the white man.’ ‘Yes, it was true; now the white man has come and we have plenty of pigs and pearl shells and soon Jesus will come and we will go to heaven’” (Gibbs 1977, 25).

At the same time, the government was providing free services and *literally* opening the roads. Government penetration in Porgera took the form of biannual patrols throughout the 1950s, which culminated in the construction of the Porgera landing strip and patrol post in the early 1960s. Thus while “opening the roads” had religious connotations for the Ipili, it reflected concrete changes that were occurring in the valley. While the government-made track to Porgera was just barely navigable by four-wheel drive, it was an improvement over what was there before. Not only was air travel visually impressive, but it also shortened travel times immensely and had associations with wealth and the sky that were hard to miss. Finally, the colonial administration’s pacification of the valley, while hardly complete, did suppress endemic feuding between Porgerans’ loose-knit networks of kin and allowed people to move freely throughout the valley. Unlike Australian taxpayers, the Ipili were introduced to these and other government services as gifts of a benevolent administration for which no payment was expected.

While Ipili welcomed government services they were not passive recipients for the government’s benevolence. Government patrol officers frequently found their work complicated by Ipili attempts to entangle them in local politics. Murderers frequently turned themselves in to patrols in order to escape payback killing from aggrieved relatives, for instance. While officers were capable of pacifying the valley somewhat, Ipili consistently acted as “free riders” in police efforts—willing to support government activities except when it proved inconvenient to them. Even census taking was impossible if Ipili found it boring. All in all, then, Ipili responses to the government demonstrated the same “expansiveness” that marked their relationship with churches. Ipili welcomed the government, but did their best to use it to their own ends—and they often succeeded.

Even before the government established a permanent presence, gold miners had arrived in Porgera. Two Australians worked alluvial finds on and off for most of the 1950s. These operations expanded in size and eventually led to large-scale prospecting in the 1970s. The gold economy

offered the possibility of wages as well as self-employment, and Porgera was notable for being in the strange position of having a gold economy before the establishment of government power.

In 1938, they had only stone tools. In the 1950s, metal tools revolutionized life in the valley, while workers were paid in salt and shells—previously scarce commodities—in copious quantities. In the 1960s, Ipili began to earn cash, and by the 1970s they owned cars and houses made out of metal and timber. In the 1980s they began receiving money in compensation for land damaged by prospecting. By the 1990s, the Ipili were receiving compensation worth US\$1 million a month in compensation from the Porgera gold mine.

The construction of the mine in the 1990s marked a shift of life in the valley even more extreme than what had come before. The Porgera gold mine meant massive physical change to the valley and well as in influx of money that was unimaginable. In September 1990 Placer Dome had 1,500 employees working on construction—a number of people equal to the population of the entire valley in 1952. The company was spending a million dollars a day, and the massive physical changes they made in the valley amazed even the expatriate staff assigned to serve as liaisons between the mine and local people. One Australian who worked for the mine's lands department remembered:

Basically it was cultural shock. I mean neither [the head of the lands department] nor I had any experience of a construction of anything of this scale. I remember walking from here where I'm sitting to Kulapi as it is now and it took me an hour and half to walk there. And there was some pegs in the ground over here and I said "what the hell are they?" And they said "that's going to be the haul road." I said "don't be silly, don't be silly—look how far apart they are! They're a hundred meters wide!" And he said "yeah?" I honestly couldn't believe the scale. From the ground up you know, a two-minute drive from an hour or more walk. It just blew my mind. Suddenly these bloody huge lumps of concrete and these gigantic trucks and fellas with no name and great power suddenly appearing, it was pretty magic stuff. (Golub fieldnotes, 2000)

Ipili were now receiving wealth that could have been described, if it was not for the extravagance of the Ipili imagination, as beyond their wildest dreams—and all of it without performing any labor themselves (although, to be sure, their loss of land was significant indeed). Between August 1987 and December 1992, Porgerans received a total of 25.9 million kina in

compensation for damage to land that was required for the mine. In one case a family received 520,000 kina for the land that they lost to the mine. Compensation was often carried up by lands officers often carried compensation up to landowners' houses in large crates, with the excess simply deposited in new bank accounts.

Landowners also received new homes that were electrified, and they began receiving their first royalty payments and occupation fees. While this was unprecedented, it was not unexpected. As far as the Ipili were concerned, the events taking place in the 1990s had been predicted for nearly half a century. As Ambi, Kipu's son, told me in 2000, “Noken abrusim, stori bilong Pingipe kamap olgeta” (You can't ignore them, all of Pingipe's prophecies have come true). As one Seventh-Day Adventist pastor told me, “Olgeta prophecy i fulfill pinis” (All of the prophecies have been fulfilled). Pingipe, Kipu, and Wasapa were vindicated. Birds from all over the world had come to eat the fruit growing on the slopes of Mt Warokari.

While compensation levels dropped once construction ended and the mine began production, the pace of change in the valley did not. In 1991 a dormant landslide became active again and began moving down toward the government station. After attempts to avert the bulk of the damage, the Porgera airstrip was closed along with most of the valley's most long-standing buildings. In 1994 the mine's explosives plant accidentally overheated and over seventy-five tons of explosives detonated. Windows ten kilometers from the site were shattered, the explosion was heard in Mt Hagen two hundred kilometers away, the bodies of the eleven victims were extruded through a chain link fence around the perimeter of the plant, and an ominous mushroom cloud formed over the valley (Jackson and Banks 2001, 207).

As may be expected, the millennium was also a focus of Ipili millenarianism. When I first arrived in Porgera in November 1999, there was already a palpable but “soft” concern in the valley about the end of the world (Bashkow 2000). Ipili avidly read the newspaper stories about the upcoming millennial bug and possible power outages. *The National*, the second largest daily newspaper in Papua New Guinea, printed a millennium countdown on its masthead that featured a large box with the number of days ticking down to zero. This national focus played directly into Ipili beliefs regarding *yu undupi*, since the term for global power outages and *yu undupi* was identical (*wol blakaut*). Additionally, Christian churches were active in promoting the millennium, most particularly the

Seventh Day-Adventist community, which sponsored a weeklong prayer meeting to prepare. The stage was thus set for yet another irony of Ipili history on 27 December 1999, when a pipe carrying highly pressurized oxygen burst, melting a pipe that ran parallel to it, carrying oxidized slurry. The result was a loud hissing noise and the formation of a giant red cloud above the mine site. Cars and buses streamed out on the only road leaving the valley, while other people fled on foot to Paiela, and “soft” beliefs about the end of world hardened rapidly.

Thus, while the Ipili have not yet become immortal, their entire history has led them to believe that such a transformation is just around the corner. Every two decades events have occurred in Porgera that fueled the Ipili belief in the end of the world or a sea change bringing a short circuit of the work-reward equation. Most communities in Papua New Guinea—or anywhere else for that matter—do not usually experience mushroom-cloud explosions, destruction of their city center due to natural disaster, and massive house burning even once in their lifetime. In the case of Porgera, these fantastic events were happening almost annually. All in all, inhabitants of the valley were living through times that any community would find extraordinary. No wonder, then, that they thought the world might end.

WHITE UTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAS

One of the senior employees of the Porgera gold mine in charge of ensuring “sustainable development” in Porgera likes to use biblical imagery to explain his job. Ipili, he says, are walking through the Sinai desert of turbulent times, and need strong, responsible, “uncorrupted” local leadership if they are to reach the Canaan of a post-mine future created by sustainable development. His inability to find a Moses among landowners results from the fact that Ipili believe the metaphor to be fundamentally flawed—Ipili see their prehistoric existence as one of deprivation. As far as they are concerned, they have already arrived in the land of milk and honey.

After a discussion of Ipili culture and history it is easy to see why Ipili might be unwilling to invest money in new businesses—they are in the end times. Or are they? Like utopias of previous times, this new age of mine-derived affluence still fails to live up to the Ipili hopes of unbridled affluence. Their experience of the white world has been one of initial excitement and growing disenchantment. And their frank assessment of

the benefits and drawbacks of what they call “the white world” can tell us about both Ipili culture and our own.

This sense of a disappointed utopia is particularly clear in Ipili relations with white material culture. There is a keen sense among Ipili that the physical objects that whites brought with them into the valley are transformed but recognizable versions of their own. Novel but not essentially *new*, white material culture is thus in some sense *familiar* to Ipili. Exciting, new, and different, white objects are not shocking. Like the Hagen people described by Strathern and by Merlan and Rumsey, Ipili people have a keen sense of the way in which the white world is a *lawa*—replacement, augmentation, transformation—of their own and thus simultaneously both new and familiar (Merlan and Rumsey 1991; M Strathern 1988). And when it comes to white material culture, white objects are seen as “better” or “augmented” versions of well-known Ipili standbys by virtue either of their infinitely durability or endless replaceability.

The example of prepackaged food demonstrates one way in which Ipili see white material culture as an augmentation of their own—white food is easier to acquire and is disposable. As every US consumer knows, some commodities are meant to be disposed and replaced by an infinite succession of exact duplicates, which are cheap and readily available. Here, the work-wealth equation is short circuited through replacement and convenience—one’s desire for food can be fulfilled without any effort at all.

Take salt, for example. As in many other areas of the highlands, salt was a valuable and scarce commodity in Enga (Wiessner and Tumu 1998). Typically, wood soaked in salt-springs was burned, and the resulting ash salt was collected and traded over long distance. Much of Ipili involvement in long-distance trading involved acting as middlemen in the salt trade or traveling to salt-springs owned by other groups with whom they had ties in order to make their own salt. Today Ipili remain “saltaholics”—every meal, be it rice or sweet potato, can and should be eaten with salt, and preferably *lots* of it. Salt, like cooking oil and sweet potato, is considered essential in any Ipili household. To be poor in Porgera is to be without salt.

The contemporary white equivalent of salt (the *lawa* of salt) is, of course, salt. The ubiquitous plastic bags of salt available in trade stores today are seen by Ipili as essentially similar to the salt that they consumed before contact, but “new and improved.” The salt that Ipili eat today is different from what they had before. It is purer, cheaper, healthier, and more readily available. The salt that Ipili eat today, then, is not merely

analogous to the salt that they had before, it is identical but transformed—the same but better. No more boring trading! Why waste hours soaking wood at a salt pool? Just heat and serve!

This tendency to see new food items as augmented, transformed versions of old standbys is even clearer in the case of cheese-flavored snack food such as Cheese Twisties and Cheese Pops. Ipili refer to such items as “white men’s frogs” (*one monge*) and they are eaten only by children. Why? Ipili children traditionally spend a good deal of their time unsupervised, running around the bush and hunting small animals such as frogs, tadpoles, spiders, and other insects, which they then cook (or not) and eat. Most Ipili—and especially Ipili boys—have engaged in this activity, which is not surprising given the low level of protein in the typical Ipili diet and the nutritional demands of growing children. As a result there is an entire range of foods considered appropriate for children to eat, but not adults. Cheese Twisties have come to be seen as analogs of these foods—the *lawā* of tadpoles.

In sum, consumer goods—in this case premade food—offer the opportunity of satisfying one’s appetite without laboring to create food. They can be purchased using mine-derived money for which one did not have to labor. But Ipili also imagine white objects to be better than their own because they are infinitely durable.

So Ipili encounters with the white world have been with a segment of it concerned with efficiency, durability, and precision itself. The presence of mining culture in the Porgera valley has heightened the Ipili’s preexisting concern with durability and given them a familiarity with the productive, industrial technology of the West that many anthropologists lack. Ipili have incorporated as “white” items that many anthropologists, whose occupation puts them at a remove from primary industry, may not be familiar with. Backhoes, loadmasters, autoclaves, primary crushers—all of these are familiar to the Ipili. Thus while the Hawaiians described by Sahlins may have sought “everything new and elegant” while spurning “coarse articles” (Sahlins 1990, 50), Ipili predilections for the permanent coalesced happily with miner’s concerns for equipment and gear that would survive heavy-duty wear and tear.

This quality of durability is encapsulated by the term “permanent material,” which has worked its way from English into Tok Pisin and Ipili. White people’s goods are seen as the “permanent material” versions of indigenous Ipili objects. The clearest example of improved durability comes from the paradigmatic case of stone and steel tools. By 1999–2000,

almost no one in the community where I did fieldwork had experienced making or using a stone axe. Nonetheless, people universally remarked on the difference in the effort it took to use stone versus steel when people reflected on the changes from the past and the present. Steel axes had become metonymic for the laborsaving properties of white material culture. Among the most present signs of the superiority of white technology are the houses that the mine had built for the community in which I lived. Physically constructed out of a timber frame with metal siding, houses made out of these materials are known in Tok Pisin as *coppa haus* (made of metal and timber), in contrast to *bus haus* (built of locally available “bush” materials). In English, at least in Porgera, this distinction was articulated as “permanent material house” and “bush house.” Permanent material houses were understood to be just that—permanent.

As a result, Ipili expect white material culture to be not just durable, but *permanent*. Axes stay sharp forever. Shoes—another keenly sought after item—keep their tread and waterproofing even after extensive use on limestone. “Permanent material” houses remain forever without maintenance. Ipili think it is funny, but also absolutely accurate, to refer to a cigarette lighter as “permanent material matches.” The idea of something being permanent and unchanging, stable, and durable across time holds enormous appeal for a people whose culture focuses on decay and regeneration. Thus the idea of white objects being “permanent material” speaks not only to dichotomies between the asocial bush and the cleared social space of Ipili homesteads, it speaks of a way of short-circuiting the work-wealth equation that is so central to the culture.

Thus we can see the rampant consumerism of Ipili society so stigmatized by outsiders—epitomized by the fabled cars that are abandoned by their owners merely because a single tire has gone flat—is directly tied to an Ipili understanding of white objects that has a deeply tragic side. For in fact “permanent material objects” are not maintenance free, but in fact maintenance intensive. Shoes require care—and preferably two pairs of shoes should be worn on alternate days—if they are to last. Houses must be maintained. Delicate clothes restrict what a wearer can do in them without destroying them. It is one of the ironies of Ipili life that objects meant to free one in fact ensnare one in a web of maintenance and work much greater than that involving bush material objects, which are all, at heart, disposable.

Like the prototypical US housewife in a kitchen full of “laborsaving devices” that in fact demand more work from her, Ipili are often disap-

pointed by their experience with white material culture. Houses with burnt-out light bulbs, clogged gutters, and broken water pipes seem to Ipili to have *essentially missed the point* and not to be *permanent* at all. Cars that break down, shoes that wear out, axes that require sharpening, electric stoves that require new heating coils, all seem to renege on the bet that Ipili have made that their mountain will be replaced by “permanent material objects.” The answer comes in the idea that Ipili were cheated by the mine, and that the real houses, the *high-quality houses*, are somewhere else—the most likely locations being in white countries and at other mining developments where landowners have gotten “real” houses.

While textiles, metal, and Cheese Twisties are ubiquitous in Porgera today, exposure to white forms of sociality is less common. Nonetheless, there are enough white miners, businessmen, and researchers around that all Porgerans have had at least a little contact, however fleeting, with white people. In the case of the elite landowners who sit on boards of directors and fly to Port Moresby and Australia for mine-related business, experience with corporate culture and the Western legal system has been more thoroughgoing. Throughout the entire spectrum of Ipili society, Ipili ponder not only white material culture, but also white mores. Just as the Ipili see the world of white material culture as an augmented version of their own, so too do they understand the wider white world—paradigmatically, Australia—as in some sense familiar. On the one hand, Ipili conceive of white society as a utopic one in which strife and discord have been vanquished. On the other hand, they imagine life in Australia as a dystopia where everything they hold dear about kith and kin has been replaced by a completely monetized system of relationships.

Initial ideas about white people were, as we have seen, highly utopic. In particular, the ability of colonial officers to end internecine feuds and pacify the valley was seen as proof of the powerful ability of whites to live in peace and harmony with one another. The introduction of Christianity and the explicit articulation of Christian ethics by white missionaries provided an explanation for the origins of white interest in conflict avoidance. In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, when Porgerans were first introduced to the court system and fighting was suppressed in the valley, courts were understood as something new, an innovation of the white men that had no clear equivalent in Porgeran custom. Although analogies were drawn between the way that both courts and homicide compensation “ended fights,” the novelty of the legal institution was striking. The suppression of violence by the government, the maintenance of social rela-

tions via litigation rather than violence, and the Christian emphasis on love and fellow feeling all came together to provide an alternative to the Ipili way of life that seemed powerful and compelling to the people who first experienced them.

Today, this sensibility has been dulled as Ipili have gained self-confidence in their dealings with outsiders. Experience with court cases at the national level, the work of hiring lawyers, making depositions, and so forth has given a small but significant number of Ipili a chance to experience the operations of the legal system in a nonlocal setting. Among these people and those close to them, the law is not seen as a way through which white men pursue peace, but the arena in which they undertake conflict. Litigation, in other words, is the *lawa* of tribal fighting, and courts, as one man said to me, are “how white men fight.”

This came out especially in interviews I conducted with the senior men who negotiated the Porgera compensation agreements with the government in the late 1980s. These middlemen, the first Ipili to have gone to college, saw analogies between preexisting aggressive cultural structures and the Western legal system. One of the Ipili’s most experienced negotiators, Jonathan Paraia, made this particularly clear to me when he discussed the formation of the Porgera Landowners Association in the mid to late 1980s:

They [less educated landowner leaders] didn’t know all this “companies” and “associations” and all that, so I had to put it in a local context where they can understand what it’s like, you know, how it operates. And they knew what *akali anda* [the men’s house] was. The men’s house is where you sit down and talk and plan and how to go and attack other people and how to go and take things from other people. (laugh) How to negotiate. And they were already used to that. And I was saying, you know, we’ve got to build our own *akali anda* now, and some of you guys are going to be leaders like clan leaders and subclan leaders, you’re going to be leaders like that. And that is where you are going to deal with . . . national government, provincial government, and company on behalf of the landowners (Golub fieldnotes 1999).

In many ways Jonathan’s statement exemplifies Ipili predatory expansion. First, through speaking with me, Jonathan was attempting to write into the ethnographic record the fact that he founded the Porgera Landowners Association—which is not in fact the case, his constant statements to the contrary notwithstanding. Second, and even more remarkable, he was drawing an analogy between a political pressure group and a traditional

military institution. Jonathan's gloss of "negotiate" as "go and attack other people and how to go and take things from them" is revealing of the way Jonathan and the Porgeran elite who interacted with the mine understood negotiation with government and company representatives as the *lawa* of Porgeran raiding parties.

On the one hand, contemporary Americans believe that systems of redistributive justice such as the Western legal system enshrine standards of impartiality, justice, and procedural fairness that could not be more at odds with warfare in the central highlands of Papua New Guinea. On the other hand, lawyers, judges, and other people actively involved in the legal system might ruefully acknowledge that the Ipili are more right than some would care to admit. Ipili see Western law as an augmented, transformed version of their own methods of conflict, but however much we might wish it, this identification might not be a misrecognition. In some ways Porgerans' long history of litigation has led them to some valuable insights about Western culture that westerners might not like to hear.

But Ipili save their greatest shock and dismay for white familiar relations. It is here, more than anywhere else, that Ipili see white lives as the dystopic negative of Ipili life.

The basic contrast here is between Papua New Guinea as a "free country" and Australia as a "money country." Porgerans are proud of and emphasize their autonomy. In Papua New Guinea, I was told repeatedly, "you can run free, eat free, sleep free." Those without formal employment could rely on "wantoks" (friends and relatives) for food. In contrast, Australia (like Port Moresby) is a place where those without money are destitute and homeless. In Australia, you must purchase food, rent a house, and pay taxes. This attitude seems to be at least forty years old, for in 1964 one patrol officer noted, "concerning the ethos of the Paiela people I gradually came to the conclusion that he regards himself as a superior being to the European, in fact as being superior to any other race of people. The superior material possessions and powers of the European are nonchalantly passed away as being essential to the white man for him to survive, whereas he, the Paiela, needs only a garden of sweet potato, his axe and bow to exist" (Porgera, folder 1, 64/65).

Classically, sociology distinguishes between societies with ascriptive status versus those with achieved status, and the creation of a formally free, monetized economy is understood to result in more freedom and autonomy rather than less. But Porgerans, like Marxists, are keenly aware of

just how far one can fall in a world where one cannot exit the market and return to a subsistence lifestyle. Thus Ipili understandings of whites articulate with a certain leftist suspicion of merely formal freedom.

But this is not all. Ipili are not just afraid of a monetized economy, they believe *all* of white life to be completely and totally commodified—as if *all* interactions are mediated by cash payments. It is this aspect of white life that Ipili find appalling. One of the most common questions I was asked in Porgera—indeed, often the first question I was asked—was whether it was true that white parents charged their children money for food and rent. The idea, I gathered, was that mealtime in white households was more or less analogous to ordering in a restaurant.

Whereas anthropologists often describe the virtues of others as part of a critique of own vices, Ipili imagine the pathologies of whites in order to make their own strengths more clear. But could the exacting, extractive white parent imagined by the Ipili be such a powerful image because of its *similarity* to their own weaknesses? In a valley where founding myths feature parents attempting to take the lives of their children, it could be that the dreams that the Ipili have of us are in fact nightmares about what they could easily become.

CONCLUSION

As stereotypes of the “ecologically noble savage” begin to show signs of aging, anthropologists and the general public have attempted to generate more satisfying accounts of indigenous people’s complex desires for development, political autonomy, and cultural independence. In the case of Papua New Guinea, anthropologists often live with communities encountering nearly stereotypic David-and-Goliath struggles with resource developers. However, when examined close up the David that anthropologists encounter often fails to live up to expectations. In this paper I have attempted to provide an account of the cultural underpinnings and historical circumstance that might help render Ipili behavior and attitudes intelligible to a wider audience.

The title of the paper is intended to capture what I understand to be the overall approach the Ipili have to encountering outsiders. Ipili retain a certain sort of predatory expansion when it comes to new things, a self-confidence that has rendered the Ipili very successful in dealing with whites even as it has caused elites in Port Moresby to revile them. To the

Ipili, whites have become reflectors of their own identity—desirable and yet despicable, worthy of emulation in some ways and yet tragically flawed in others. And vice versa.

To an audience familiar with stereotypes of noble savages, the reaction of the Ipili to the mine can be startling. Elites in Port Moresby who romanticize a traditional “Melanesian Way” feel betrayed by landowners who fail to conform to their expectations. At the same time, first-world activists interested in finding “guardians of the forest” in Porgera will be disappointed indeed at the alacrity with which the Ipili, as they say, “traded their mountain for development.”

But it may be that the unease the Ipili instill in others is due to the fact that they are driven by concerns remarkably like “our own.” Their desire for new commodities, time-saving devices, and prepared food is in many ways not so different from what one would find in any major city in the United States. Thus it could be said that “they” are not as bad as “we” are, or, to put it another way, that “we” are as good as “they.”

So which is the original affluent society? Just as we see our own weak points in Ipili prodigality, so do Ipili imagine whites, as a version of their present or possible selves. This examination of Ipili culture reveals them to be a bit more like ourselves than we have been led to believe. Sahlins looked to hunters and gatherers to explode the Western, Hobbesian conception of infinite need. Studying the Ipili suggests that the West is not the only place plagued by need and want. Ipili do not denounce consumer society in the name of a pristine, authentic primitivism. They denounce it for failing to make good on its promises. The problem, as they see it, is not *enough* affluence.

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Abstract

The idea of the “ecologically noble savage” once linked environmental activists and indigenous people. Today the concept is increasingly seen as problematic. In the Porgera district of Enga Province, Papua New Guinea, Ipili people confront massive social change brought about by the presence of a large gold mine. This paper explores how Ipili people find some aspects of global consumer culture to offer utopian possibilities for change, while others present dystopic inversions of their own culture. In doing so, it compares western attempts to understand Ipili as noble or ignoble savages with Ipili attempts to make sense of the material culture and mores of outsiders. It concludes that both Ipili and westerners have unsettling insights into each other’s culture.

KEYWORDS: Porgera, Enga, Papua New Guinea, mining, affluent society, consumerism, utopia